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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 003517

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SUBJECT: KING FAHD HEALTH CRISIS UPDATE

Classified By: Ambassador James Oberwetter, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: As of Saturday, May 28, King Fahd remains in King Faisal Specialist Hospital, undergoing unspecified "medical tests," according to statements released by the Saudi press agency and sourced to the Royal Court and "official sources." The mood in Riyadh is quiet and normal, although Embassy contacts report an undercurrent of nervousness among the general population. There are some signs of heightened security measures, including helicopter overflights, but nothing consistent with earlier press reports of a "state of emergency." We will continue to monitor the situation closely as it evolves. End Summary.

12. (U) According to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), King Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz remains hospitalized. A statement issued by the Royal Court and reported by SPA May 27 said that the king had been admitted to the King Faisal Specialist Hospital for unspecified tests. SPA reported today that the tests are proceeding normally and the king is doing well.

13. (C) Embaffs and Embassy contacts in Riyadh report that the situation in the city is essentially normal. There have been a few signs of heightened security measures, including helicopter overflights, but nothing consistent with earlier press reports of a "state of emergency."

14. (C) Nevertheless, Embassy contacts report an undercurrent of nervousness among the general population. This is understandable in view of the Kingdom's demographics. King Fahd ascended to the throne in 1982 after his brother King Khalid died of a heart attack. Since the median age of the Saudi population is just over 21 years, more than half the country's citizens were born during Fahd's 23-year reign, and he is the only king they have ever known. Even though he withdrew from running the government following a stroke in 1995, leaving his half brother Crown Prince Abdullah as the Kingdom's de facto ruler, Fahd has been an omnipresent element in the lives of the Kingdom's inhabitants. His face is on the money and his official portrait hangs in countless government offices. Popular uncertainty probably accounts for the fact that the Saudi stock market declined by 5 percent this week once rumors began to circulate that the king's health was deteriorating.

15. (C) Embassy contacts report that all or most of the senior princes are present in Riyadh. Should the King die in the near future, it will be a relatively simple matter to convene a family council, if indeed this has not happened already. We expect that the Al Saud family leadership would confirm Crown Prince Abdullah as King and Prince Sultan, currently Defense Minister, as Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister. At this point, the big question would seem to be who would become Second Deputy Prime Minister and thus Crown Prince in waiting. Speculation centers around Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, currently Minister of Interior. However, Prince Abd al-Rahman, currently the Vice Minister of Defense and Aviation, and Prince Salman, Governor of Riyadh, are also seen as candidates for the Second Deputy Prime Minister spot. Of course, Al Saud family politics are notoriously opaque to outsiders, and even prominent non-royal Saudis admit that surprises are always possible where the royal family is concerned.

¶6. (C) We will continue to monitor the situation and report further as it evolves.

Oberwetter